

Cinema Journal "In Focus" section, summer 2007

Visual Culture, Scholarship, and Sexual Images

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Introduction: Prior Constraints

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Most of the publicity around sexual image matters in recent years has focused on professors "teaching pornography." This seems to be a perennial topic for slow news days (especially late August) as uninformed reporters troll for sensational quotes, while pundits and Fox talk show hosts fulminate about matters they don't bother to investigate. Yet beyond sensational journalism, everyone who seriously studies the area of sexual representation knows that publishing one's research often involves problems. The object of study can fall within advertising or art history, gender studies or medical imaging, production codes or government censorship, ratings systems or FCC rulings, internet pornography or performance art. But expanded control under intellectual property law, attempts to restrict fair use, new legislation, and politically charged enforcement by administrations courting favor with ultraconservative and fundamentalist constituents produce a sometimes treacherous field. The cumulative effect of restrictions on publishing images is to constrain scholarship, to limit the circulation of ideas and information, and to inhibit the development of a

comprehensive understanding of past history, current practices, and future policy. The purpose of this In Focus section is to examine the current state of sexual representation scholarship in terms of publishing visual material as part of the research.

Given the internet's global reach, new technologies of image creation, and contemporary image search engines' ability to find things quickly, and it's clear that we're in a strange new digital world. Anyone with internet access and a search engine can easily find a vast range of sexual representations, licit and illicit, indecent and obscene, softcore and hardcore, legal and probably illegal--at least somewhere. And that's the free stuff, before you have to provide a credit card to prove adult verification.

The range of images covered under "sexual representation" has effectively expanded in recent years with a broadening of the field of media studies and technological changes in media. The avant garde has always been involved with taboo breaking sexuality seen in canonical short films such as Paul Sharits' *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* and Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses* as well as art cinema dramatic features such as Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* and Pasolini's *Salò*.

Subscription cable TV such as Showtime has long featured soft core erotic thrillers as well as full frontal documentaries such as HBO's successful *Real Sex* series. Basic cable includes History Channel series on "the history of sex," while E!'s *Dr. 90210*, shows plastic surgery on private parts (with teasing digital blurs). Pushed to compete, broadcast TV moves into stronger topics and more explicit display (not very subtly authenticated with digital blurs over breasts and

genitals). In new media commercialism, flashing body parts such as *Girls Gone Wild* is matched by amateur contributions on social networking sites such as YouTube and LiveVideo. Celebrity culture increasingly revolves around explicit images with a Google image search instantly producing multiple results displaying Janet Jackson's Super Bowl "wardrobe malfunction," Britney Spears' repeated forays to nightclubs without underwear, and Paris Hilton's lovemaking sessions. Clever computer game customizers create flesh leotards for their Sims who then engage in sexual activities. Digital 3-D modeling programs have advanced to produce relatively plausible "photorealistic" characters who can then be cast into still and moving images activities (cross-generational incest seems to be a favorite), joining *hentai* and *anime* depictions of taboo sex.

As a broad cultural phenomenon, pornography can be discussed without visual examples, but close textual analysis is one of the central procedures of contemporary media analysis, as evidenced by such successful introductory textbooks as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* and Jeremy Butler's *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*. Recently I published an article on the change from theatrical film to home video pornography in an anthology that would have no images.¹ Without visual support, I had to forego a discussion of changes in visual style, which I judge to be a significant aspect of the transition. The basis of modern scholarly analysis (as opposed to belles-lettres subjectivity) is, of course, the reasonable presentation of data and analysis so others can review it and compare their

¹ "The Change from Film to Video Pornography: Implications for Analysis," *Pornography: Film and Culture*, Peter Lehman, ed., (Rutgers Depth of Field Series). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 154-167

understanding. But the prohibitions on sexual images produce a vacuum rather than a discursive conversation.

Publishing one's analysis using explicit images involves multiple hurdles and gatekeepers. For example, in my own experience, I was contacted by two editors about the same time asking if I would contribute to forthcoming publications. By prior agreement, the same article was submitted to *The Journal of Visual Culture* edited by Marquand Smith, and the second expanded edition of *Dirty Looks*, an anthology edited by Pamela Church Gibson.² Both editors enthusiastically agreed in advance that I could illustrate the article on virtual child pornography with images of my choice. Truth be told, I thought they were sincere but naive, and I doubted the publishers would go along. So, I wrote the article in a way that it could be run without images, and I wouldn't have to go through a drastic rewrite. I submitted it with a range of images I thought were useful and illustrative. The article explored US legislative and legal issues surrounding changing definitions of childhood and obscenity and pointed out, among other things, that attempts to change definitions to expand censorship created unintended consequences. An example was the Coppertone suntan lotion advertising icon of a little girl with a playful pup pulling down the back of her swimsuit bottom. For decades this image had been read as "innocent," and was

² "Virtual Child Porn: The Law and the Semiotics of the Image," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 3:2, April 2004, 35-52; "Virtual Child Porn: The Law and the Semiotics of the Image," *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson, second edition, expanded (London: British Film Institute, 2004) 71-84. The *More Dirty Looks* version is slightly longer.

widely published (at one point child actor Jody Foster was the Coppertone girl). But although it was usually rendered as a painted, not photographed, image (and drawings and paintings are considered less realistic and less actionable under the law), under new law it could be considered pornographic.³

Similarly, fake images, such as the head of underaged Britney Spears photoshopped onto an explicitly pornographic adult female body widely circulated on the Internet. Bawdy cartoons provided another image stream, ranging from intergenerational incest among The Simpsons to Donald Duck's nephews cavorting with Daisy. Other images included the film *American Beauty* (mentioned in a Supreme Court decision) and Calvin Klein underwear ads. As it turned out, when the UK publishers (Sage for JVC and British Film Institute for *Dirty Looks*) saw the article with the images, they balked. Interestingly enough, for different reasons from the two publishers, most of the images were considered unpublishable. The Simpsons images, for example, were pre-judged "not legitimate" since they violated proprietary image rights. (Although it's hard to believe the creators of The Simpsons would want to claim these outlaw satires as their own. The fact that they were parodies and thus fell under mocking rather than reproduction of copyrighted materials with an intent to commercially exploit ownership, seems obvious...though nothing is obvious to litigious lawyers.) I say this not to air old matters, for despite our differences I think the publishers acted honestly and ethically from their perspective, but to point out that in fact the law is different in different national jurisdictions, and

³ Coppertone seems to have withdrawn the image for a while in the G. W. Bush era, but recently it has reappeared on the containers.

that today not only is one dealing with different legal systems and standards of obscenity and censorship regulation, also one is facing different systems and interpretations of copyright and image ownership.

In my more cynical moments I think that publishers tend to use fancy footwork moving through an elaborate set of displacements to avoid what is basically their discomfort with the raw power of sexual images. Alternately matters of taste, legal liability, finding a printer, unwillingness to invoke fair use (or “fair dealing” in the UK and Canada), obscenity law, sales, intellectual property, cost of obtaining rights, technical aspects of image quality, and so forth are brought forward to avoid what smells like censorship and prior restraint. These issues also concern feminist anti-pornography scholars. Sociologist Diana E. H. Russell produced several volumes arguing that pornography is inherently misogynistic and leads to rape and violence against women.⁴ Positioned from a basic content analysis coupled with a direct cause behaviorism model, she believed that the anti-porn activist toolbox had to include showing images to be convincing. But she was unable to find a publisher, and she ended up self-publishing *Against Pornography: The Evidence of Harm* (Berkeley: Russell Publications, 1993), essentially a compilation of images from (and like) the early feminist anti-pornography slide shows.⁵

⁴ Diana E. H. Russell, *Dangerous Relationships: Pornography, Misogyny, and Rape* (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 1998); Diana E. H. Russell, ed., *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

⁵ The book thus documents ephemera which is not otherwise available to later researchers. Russell’s preface provides elaborate details about the barriers to publishing the images and her belief that actually seeing sample images is necessary to understanding the subject.

These complications compromise research agendas. For example, I have thought about writing an analysis of a subgenre of 1970s theatrical porn known as “roughies” and “sickies.” These features played mostly in New York’s 42nd Street porn grindhouses, combined sex and violence, particularly rape and torture, and for the most part were lost until some recent DVD issues by Alpha Blue Archives.⁶ They present an interesting case because they are the most obvious example supporting the anti-porn “porn is violence” argument. (The notorious, much-cited-but-little-seen, *Snuff* is an atypical example.) Removed from circulation, along with almost all depictions of violence in commercial porn, due to targeted prosecution in the early years of the Reagan administration, they were seldom addressed by advocates for a sex-positive position, and unavailable for cultural or historical analysis. Yet they provide a “limit text” for testing theoretical assumptions about pornography, the representation of sexuality, and violence in dramatic narratives. These films present overt misogynistic violence that goes far beyond the consensual role-playing of SM theatrics. The cultural/aesthetic question here covers much the same theoretical terrain as recent work on “Asia Extreme,” violent horror, and euro-trash.⁷ But would I be able to find a publisher for an analysis that demands careful comparative style analysis? If I argue that markers of “high art” style function as defenses (in the Freudian sense) which allow fantasies of sex and violence to be “acceptably” depicted (think Allen Jones’ fetish paintings, Helmut Newton’s kinky fashion

⁶ Some of the subgenre are also available from Something Weird Video.

⁷ Introductions to these subjects: Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams, eds, *Horror International* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); Jay McRoy, ed. *Japanese Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Mikita Borttman, *Offensive Films* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005); Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

photos)⁸, can I then contrast those aesthetically elegant depictions with the deliberately crude trash images of roughies?⁹ Could I compare some images from sickies with the Abu Ghraib photos? Is form operating as a defense when the style is crude? Or is there some other system operating, such as genre, narration, or irony, acting to distance the viewer's reaction from the blatant image material? What of viewers who can't, or don't, have any separation from the fantasy? What does that tell us about spectatorship, both social and individual, gendered and idiosyncratic? I don't think these questions can be critically considered without close visual analysis. But would publishers agree and have the conviction to make the images available?

The contributors to this In Focus topic underline the limits of current constraints on free publication. While sexual images are freely available as never before for those who look for them, most publishers are narrowing their willingness to allow visual analysis of this material. Tom Waugh recounts his experience in studying the history of gay male images, pointing out the distortion of actual social and cultural history if some images are proscribed. Linda Williams reflects on her experiences in publishing her pioneering study *Hard Core* and subsequent

⁸ Which brings us back, of course, to Laura Mulvey's pre-"Visual Pleasure" article on Allen Jones' fetish image art: "You Don't Know What's Happening, Do You Mr. Jones?" *Spare Rib* no. 8 (Feb. 1973) which includes ample images. Reprinted without illustration in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). The essay is revealing because it demonstrates that when Mulvey discusses "fetishism" in the Visual Pleasure article, she has in mind not only Freud and Lacan, but basic BD and SM clothing, gestures, and styles.

⁹ As I'm writing this introduction, I'm finishing for *Jump Cut* an article on Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* (Hong Kong, 2004) which deals with how exquisite form (cinematography by Chris Doyle, Wong Kar Wai's cameraman) relates to displaying disturbing and taboo images of fetuses, abortion, and cannibalism in the service of a dark satire which is an allegory of global capitalism.

work. Looking at new media image cultures, Peter Lehman argues that to discuss social porn internet sites with amateur contributions, reproducing images is essential to analysis. Reflecting on his own experience looking at racialized porn images, Daniel Bernardi argues that only with reproduction of images can reasonable scholarly differences be made manifest for analytical discussion. José B. Capino shows that images are necessary to present the material culture of porn (advertising, packaging, venues, etc.) and clarify evolving visual styles and taste cultures in pornography. Katrien Jacobs provocatively asks about scholars' own real or potential investment in the fantasy materials they study. Finally, I summarize additional issues raised in a workshop at the 2007 SCMS meeting in Chicago on sexual image materials.